THE EARLY DIRECTORS OF THE MEDICAL SERVICES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY ARMY

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SHORTLY after assuming command of the troops encamped before Boston, General Washington informed Congress that he was greatly concerned about the army's medical establishment[1]. He had found it without over-all direction, without coordination of effort. In measured terms he had spoken of its "very unsettled condition". Torn as it was by quarrels, rivalries and dissension, with the surgeons at one another's throats, he could, without exaggeration, have called the situation chaotic.

With the troops that had hurriedly assembled in the environs of Boston after the encounters at Lexington and Concord, there had come a considerable number of doctors. These men, who were attached to individual regiments, had brought with them their own few medicines and surgical instruments and had established, in barns and sheds, what they euphemistically called "regimental hospitals". Since it soon became evident that these "hospitals" could not provide adequate medical care, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress established other, better equipped units that were placed under the direction of its own appointees. The regimental surgeons were up in arms. They were in no mood to relinquish the care of their patients to the larger hospitals as poorly equipped as their own were. They were not going to be pushed aside; they would demand equal consideration.

In response to the Commander-in-Chief's urgent request that Congress give this untenable situation its immediate attention, legislation was enacted establishing a medical department for the army[2]. This legislation made provision for the appointment of a "Director-General and Chief Physician" who was to head the department, and whom it invested with great authority and responsibility. It determined the number of surgeons and other personnel to be employed in the department and it called upon the Director-General to furnish "medicines, bedding

and all other necessaries . . . [and] to superintend the whole". For some inconceivable reason, the act made no provisions for the regimental surgeons. It took no cognizance of their grievances. It did not determine from where they were to receive supplies. It ignored their very existence. By its omissions it created conditions which were perennially to plague the Director-General and which more than once almost wrecked the medical department.

The man unanimously elected by Congress to head the new department, Dr. Benjamin Church, seemed eminently suited to iron out the disputes that had arisen in the ranks of the medical men. He was not only a leading physician but a tried patriot who stood high in the councils of the revolutionaries. He was a member of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, and he was widely known as the man who had delivered the oration commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Boston Massacre. His antecedents made him appear as the ideal arbiter.

However, from the very beginning, Church was faced with obstacles beyond his control. By neglecting to integrate the regimental surgeons within the medical department, Congress had, unwittingly, created two medical services, each competing with the other for the army's scanty medical supplies. When Church did not fully comply with the regimental surgeons' requests for more adequate supplies, they accused him of deliberately withholding from them articles direly needed for the care of their sick. The Director-General in turn branded their demands as inordinate. Accusations were hurled back and forth. The altercations took on such dimensions that Washington, concluding that there was "either unpardonable abuse on one side, or an inexcusable neglect on the other", ordered the contending parties to appear before military courts of inquiry[3]. The honeymoon, if there had been one, had lasted little more than a month.

The courts' hearings were held in rapid succession. The final hearing, cryptically postponed "until further orders . . . on account of the indisposition of Dr. Church", was never held. The Director-General had been placed under arrest! A Council of War, presided over by the Commander-in-Chief, found him guilty of holding criminal correspondence with the enemy. The army and country were stunned. In an official communication Washington informed the Congress of what had transpired[4]. "A painful, though necessary duty", he called it.

A letter, in cipher, addressed to a British officer in Boston (then within the enemy's lines), had been intercepted. The messenger, who turned out to be Church's mistress, had steadfastly refused to disclose the identity of the writer. Under "threat and persuasion" she had finally broken down and had named Dr. Church as its author. Church was immediately apprehended. He did not deny having written the letter, but he assured his interrogators that it contained nothing criminal. When deciphered it was found to be a queerly garbled, apparently innocuous, document. Church's papers, which had been seized at the time of his arrest, contained, as far as could be seen, nothing incriminating. However, there was a strong suspicion that a confidant of Church's had had access to them prior to their seizure. In view of the importance of the entire matter, the Council of War was turning it over to the Congress for further disposition. In the interim, Church was being held incommunicado.

On October 27th, Church was brought before the bar of the Massachusetts House of Representatives[5]. In his personally conducted, skillful defense (he had been refused counsel), he maintained that he had attempted to contact the British for the purpose of bringing about a termination of hostilities. Despite his eloquence he failed to convince the legislators of the purity of his motives. He was found guilty by them of having endeavored to carry on a "highly criminal and dangerous" correspondence with the enemy and was sentenced to solitary confinement, "without the use of pen, ink, and paper", and no one was to be permitted to converse with him except "in the presence and hearing of a Magistrate of the Town, or the Sheriff of the County . . . and in the English language".

Under the rigors of his imprisonment in the jail at Norwich, his health failed and after a year he was released under high bail. Finally, he was given permission to leave the country. The ship on which he sailed for the West Indies was lost at sea. He was never heard of again.

Immediately after Church's ignominious dismissal, the Congress approached Dr. John Morgan, one of America's most distinguished physicians, with the request that he take over the vacated post. Unhesitatingly, Morgan followed the call of his country. Little did he foresee how

tragically his decision to serve was to influence the future course of his life.

Morgan had an enviable record. After serving a medical apprenticeship in his native Philadelphia, he had gone abroad to complete his medical education. At Edinburgh, the foremost English-speaking medical school of the day, he had received the university's coveted medical degree. In London he had sat at the feet of the famous Doctors Hunter and had trained under the renowned Dr. John Fothergill. At Paris and Padua he had rounded out his medical studies. Not yet thirty, he had received the distinction of being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Licentiate of the Royal Colleges of Edinburgh and London, a member of the Académie Royale de Chirurgie of Paris and of the Society of Belles-Lettres of Rome.

On his return to Philadelphia, in 1765, he became the prime mover in the founding of the first medical school in America, and in the same year he was appointed to the new institution's professorship of the "Theory and Practice of Physic". Within a few years he was one of Philadelphia's most sought-after doctors.

When Morgan reported to General Washington for duty at Cambridge, in the middle of October, he found the medical department in a state of turmoil and confusion, still shaken by the shock of the Church affair. With his customary energy and organizational talent, the new Director-General approached the many pressing problems that awaited him, foremost among them the procurement of medical supplies. Within a few weeks he was able to collect considerable quantities of hospital stores and some much-needed medicines. He also tackled the distasteful task of having to weed out those regimental surgeons who were unfit for medical duty with the army.

The quality of medical practice in colonial America varied tremendously. There were no established standards for the training of physicians, nor were there regulations for their licensure. Besides well-trained, highly qualified doctors, there was a large body of practitioners little better than quacks.

To separate the wheat from the chaff, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress had ruled in the early weeks of the war that all physicians were

to be examined by a committee of doctors before being commissioned as medical officers[6]. The examinations were very exacting. One of the candidates, the story goes, who had been "agitated into a state of perspiration", was asked to discuss measures for the treatment of rheumatism. Among others he proposed bringing the patient into a sweat. Asked how he would effect this in his patient, he said, after some hesitation, that he would "have him examined by a medical committee" [7].

During the chaotic weeks of Church's directorship the examinations had been discontinued. Morgan's insistence that they again be taken up met with the vehement resistance of the regimental surgeons, who did everything, from feigning illness to soliciting the intervention of their sponsors, the regimental commanders, to evade them. Morgan was soon as unpopular with them as Church had been.

Health conditions in the American encampment before Boston had generally been good. There had occurred, as was to be expected, cases of smallpox, dysentery and typhus, but there had been no major outbreaks of these dreaded diseases. The troops operating against Canada at this period were less fortunate. For them these maladies, especially smallpox, became more deadly than the weapons of the enemy. "The smallpox is ten times more terrible than the British, Canadians and Indians together", wrote John Adams.

The ill-fated expeditions against Quebec and Montreal had been hastily conceived and launched without sufficient medical, or other, preparation. Too few doctors were assigned to the army and they had virtually no medical supplies. From Fort George, Dr. Jonathan Potts reported that the distressed situation of the sick was "not to be described". He had under his care more than one thousand patients, crowded into sheds. To attend this large number there were, besides himself, only four senior physicians and four mates, and between them they had not a grain of medicine.

A young regimental surgeon who had been ordered to hospital duty in Isle-aux-Noix was appalled by the dreadful conditions there. "Language cannot describe nor imagination paint, the scenes of misery and distress the Soldiery endure", he notes in his Journal[8]. Their requests for help were "as little regarded as the singing of Crickets in a Summer's

evening". In one large barn, crowded with soldiers suffering from smallpox, he found many who could not see, speak or walk. Two had large maggots, an inch long, crawl out of their ears, and maggots were on almost every part of their body. "No mortal will ever believe what these suffered unless they were eye witnesses . . ." In a later entry he speaks of the sick who were "crowded into a dirty, lousy, stinking Hospital, enough to kill well men". "It made my heart ache to visit the Hospital, to see the Dysentery rage, with unabated fury among them; when I had not one article, calculated with their assistance . . ."

After the evacuation of Boston by the British on March 17, 1776, General Washington ordered Morgan to make preparations in anticipation of a campaign at New York. By the middle of the summer the Director-General had established several fairly well equipped hospitals there. The disastrous Battle of Long Island played havoc with his plans. The sick and wounded and the army's medical supplies had to be removed from the city to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy. Hastily, new installations were made ready in Westchester and on the New Jersey side of the Hudson. Morgan and his staff labored day and night. Especially the Director-General gave his all. He appeared to be everywhere at the same time. He personally picked the sites for the new hospitals; he himself supervised the evacuation of the patients; he directed the removal of the hospital stores; he spent many weary hours on horseback traveling back and forth; and, whenever he could, he attended the sick, dressing their wounds and giving orders for their care. Gradually he succeeded in bringing a semblance of order out of the chaos[9]. He all but collapsed under the strain.

His almost superhuman effort received but little recognition. He was even blamed by many for the inevitable disruption of orderly medical care. The injustice of the charge hurt him to the quick.

It is hard to visualize how scarce medical supplies were at this period. Fifteen regimental surgeons who had brought their own instruments had, among them, only four scalpels or knives for enlarging wounds, three pairs of forceps for extracting bullets, very few bandages and tourniquets, hardly any lint or tow and only two ounces of sponge. In the general confusion during the retreat from New York much equipment was lost. To one of his hospital surgeons, who had appealed for scalpels, Morgan wrote: "I send you two . . . if you want more, use a razor for an incision knife . . ." [10] Medicines could

only be had by buying them from private physicians who, understandably, were often reluctant to part with them. Morgan did not hesitate to apply pressure if necessary. "I must beg you will endeavour to procure me a list of the medicines for sale, belonging to Dr. Brownjohn; and the selling prices . . .", Morgan wrote to his above-mentioned aide, and ominously he added, "If Dr. Brownjohn is backwards to sell let me know; and I will take measures accordingly" [11].

During these trying weeks Morgan's implacable adversaries, the regimental surgeons, continued their attacks upon him with such vehemence that General Washington became convinced, as he informed Congress, that they were "aiming . . . to break up" the medical department. The Commander-in-Chief had harsh words for the regimental surgeons, many of whom, he said, were "very great rascals, countenancing the men in sham complaints to exempt them from duty, and often receiving bribes to certify indispositions with a view to procure discharges or furloughs". In "numberless instances" they had requisitioned medicines, hospital stores and other supplies in the "most profuse and extravagant manner for private purposes". To end the "constant bickering" between them and Morgan, Washington advised that they be made to "look up to the Director-General as a superior" [12].

Congress not only disregarded this recommendation, but it further undermined the authority of the Director-General by creating, without consulting Washington, an independent medical department for the army in New Jersey, to be headed by Dr. William Shippen, Jr. Morgan retained the title of Director-General, but he was given no authority over the new appointee, and his own jurisdiction was limited to the medical care of the troops on the east side of the Hudson.

It was an unheard-of step, which Morgan regarded as a demotion. Undoubtedly it was intended as such. Morgan's enemies had achieved their first visible success in their campaign to oust him.

The younger Shippen, who had apparently spearheaded the attack, was, like Morgan, a leading Philadelphia physician and Morgan's colleague at the Medical College. In him Morgan's detractors had obtained an influential, socially and politically well-connected ally. His father, the elder Dr. Shippen, was a member of Congress, as were his brothers-

in-law Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot Lee, of Virginia. Shippen House, the family home, was a center of Philadelphia society.

During the following months Shippen, as we know from his correspondence, did not hesitate to utilize these connections to let his "friends in Congress" know that "neglect and iniquity in the medical department" had been responsible for the death of many more "brave Americans" than had been the "sword of the enemy". As to his own department, he was not ashamed to own "that he was conscious that it had many imperfections", but he "flattered" himself that none of them had "arisen from want of care and integrity in the director . . ."[13]

The underhanded attacks against Morgan continued through the fall. On January 9th, 1777, he was dismissed by Congress, without an explanation and without a hearing.

Morgan immediately requested an investigation of his conduct in office. He published an impassioned "Vindication of His Public Character in the Station of Director-General of the Military Hospitals, and Physician in Chief to the American Army"[9]. He virtually begged for the opportunity to appear before the Congress. For almost two years the legislators turned a deaf ear to his pleas. Finally, a congressional committee was appointed to hear him. On June 12th, 1779, the committee declared that ". . . Dr. John Morgan hath in the most satisfactory manner vindicated his conduct in every respect . . ."

The rehabilitation came too late. Morgan was a broken man. He retired more and more from public life and died a recluse, at the age of fifty-four. Dr. Benjamin Rush, who had been called to his bedside, recorded in his Commonplace Book, on October 15th, 1789, that he had found him "dead in a small hovel, surrounded with books and papers, and on a light dirty bed. He was attended only by a washerwoman, one of his tenants. . . . What a change from his former rank and prospects in Life! The man who once filled half the world with his name, had now scarcely friends enough left to bury him."[14]

Since the summer of 1776 there had been much sickness also among the main body of the American troops. The crowding of the soldiers in close quarters, especially in the hospitals, and the unsanitary conditions under which they lived contributed to a rapid, unrestrained spread of infectious and contagious diseases. At times, a fourth of the army

was on the sick list. A severe epidemic of "putrid diarrhea" (dysentery) broke out in the American encampment during the campaign for New York. "Multitudes melted away . . . from this miserable disease and died", wrote a contemporary army surgeon[15]. In the military hospitals at Princeton and Bethlehem, jail fever (typhus) took a dreadful toll, and the mortality among hospitalized soldiers in Philadelphia during the fall and winter of 1776-77 was so great that the dead could no longer be buried in single graves. Large square pits were dug in the potter's field and filled near to the top with coffins.

The suffering of the sick and dying was enhanced by the almost total lack of everything needed for their care. The doctors' frantic appeals to the authorities went mostly unheeded. "I have been incessantly making applications for these last twelve months to all the departments for supplies, but cannot procure any", wrote the commanding medical officer of the military hospital in Boston. "For some days [the sick] have not had an ounce of meat; not a stick of wood but what they have taken from the neighboring fences; for near a week not a vegetable; and scarcely any medicine for above a year"[16]. They would have perished but for the charitable donations of a few private individuals.

The morale of the hospitalized soldiers was at a low ebb. They disobeyed the surgeons and nurses, they quarreled and fought with one another, they went out as they pleased, they sold their arms, blankets and even their clothes to buy rum, and often they plundered the inhabitants in the neighborhood.

Everywhere it was the same melancholy story. The doctors were helpless. In bitter anger one of them thus gave vent to his feelings: ". . . Curse on him or them by whom [such] evil is produced. The vengeance of an offended Deity must overtake the miscreants sooner or later . . . I shall wait on his Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief, and represent our situation, but I am persuaded it can have little effect, for what can he do? He may refer the matter to Congress, they to the Medical Committee who would probably pow-wow over it for a while and no more heard of it. Thus we go before the wind . . ."[17]

At the beginning of April, 1777, three months after Morgan's dismissal, Shippen was appointed to the directorship of the recently reorganized medical department. Under the new set-up the Director-

General was given enhanced powers, the number of his aides was increased considerably, funds were more adequate and the regimental surgeons were, at last, placed under the Director-General's jurisdiction.

Despite such auspicious conditions Shippen, too, ended in failure. He possessed neither the earnestness of purpose nor the strength of character that would have been needed to cope successfully with the difficult situation under which he was called upon to direct the army's medical services. Vanity and the desire to supersede Morgan appear to have been the motives for his seeking the directorship of the medical department.

Among the doctors appointed by Congress to serve in important posts under Shippen there was young, capable and aspiring Dr. Benjamin Rush who, in later years, was to become the most famous American physician of his day. Now, at the age of thirty-one, he was a member of Congress and the chairman of its medical committee. In his desire to further serve the revolutionary cause he had volunteered for service in the army and had been appointed Surgeon General in the Middle Department. In this capacity he had seen duty in the military hospitals during the campaign for Philadelphia in the late summer of 1777, and he had become convinced that the system under which these hospitals were operated was in need of radical reorganization. He was also appalled by Shippen's handling of the affairs of the medical department. He believed the Director-General to be incompetent, negligent in performing his duties, and not above submitting incorrect reports on the number of sick and dead. He also suspected him of speculating in hospital stores.

In a letter to the Commander-in-Chief, Rush gave a detailed report on the abuses he had observed in the hospitals and he made suggestions on how they could be remedied[18]. He made no attack on the person of the Director-General. Rush's letter was submitted to Congress by Washington. Shippen and Rush were ordered to appear before a congressional committee, which absolved the Director-General. Rush thereupon handed in his resignation.

Conditions in the American military hospitals went from bad to worse. The desperate financial situation of the young republic made it nearly impossible to supply the hospitals with even the most necessary things for the care of the patients. Medicines, surgical instruments, often even food, were in shortest supply.

During these heavy and fateful years Morgan, who had lived in semi-retirement under the shadow of his humiliating dismissal, had never uttered in public a word against his successor. On June 15, 1779, three days after his vindication by Congress, he addressed a letter to John Jay, President of that body, charging Shippen with "Malpractice and Misconduct in Office", and offering to appear before a congressional committee to give evidence in support of his charges.

For many months, in spite of Morgan's further prodding, Congress did not move. The Director-General's important connections were apparently being brought into play. Pressure against Shippen became stronger. In March, 1780, the Director-General was arrested and brought before a court-martial. He was charged with selling and speculating in hospital stores, failure to keep proper accounts, neglect of his duties and other "Scandalous and infamous practices such as are unbecoming the Character of an Officer and Gentleman".

Rush, who testified against Shippen, accused him of negligence, of submitting to Congress reports of the sick and dead that were mostly false, of selling wine and sugar to tavernkeepers, of having "lived in a constant round of pleasure and dissipation". He further stated that in nine months' service he had never seen the Director-General inside a hospital.

The trial dragged on for several months. Shippen was formally acquitted on most counts. The court, however, found that he had speculated in and sold hospital stores, "that is, stores proper for hospitals . . . which conduct they consider highly improper, and justly reprehensible". Congress did not approve the court-martial's acquittal. Shippen was discharged from arrest but dismissed as Director-General. Reinstated a few months later, he shortly thereafter resigned "voluntarily". He had been given the opportunity to save face. Once again his powerful friends, it seems, had come to his assistance.

On January 17, 1781, Shippen's deputy, Dr. John Cochran, was appointed to succeed him. The new Director-General took over at a time when the medical department was on the point of disintegrating because of lack of funds. There was no money for the upkeep of the hospitals nor for the salaries of the army doctors. Many surgeons, Cochran informed the Chairman of the Medical Committee of Congress, had not received a shilling in nearly two years, and, appealing to a friend for help, another physician wrote: ". . . Joe and myself have

spent all our money, and fear, unless we can borrow, we shall starve; do pray prevent it by sending us cash. You may depend upon it, no Surgeons of the army can lend us a shilling".

Under such adversities and under the greatest personal risks (more army doctors died, in proportion to their numbers, than officers of the line) the medical men of the revolution carried on. Some may have been but fairly good doctors, some may not have been worthy of the trust placed in them, but the vast majority served their country faithfully according to their lights.

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